

Remarks Announcing Togo D. West, Jr., as Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs and an Exchange With Reporters

December 2, 1997

The President. Good morning, everyone. Togo and Gail West, and Hershel Gober and the distinguished representatives of our veterans organizations—we have people here from the American Legion, the VFW, Disabled American Veterans, Am-Vets, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Vietnam Veterans, Gold Star Mothers and Gold Star Wives, Retired Officers Association, and the G.I. Forum. I thank you all for coming.

Before I begin I think it is important that I say just a few words about the tragic killing of the three high school students in Paducah yesterday. Like all Americans, I was shocked and heartbroken by the terrible news, which I followed very closely when it broke. Of course, we still don't know all the facts surrounding the tragedy or why a 14-year-old boy would take a pistol and open fire on his classmates in a prayer group. We may never know, but we must redouble our efforts to protect all our children from violence and to make sure our schools are free from violence and the means to wreak it.

I believe that I speak for every American in sending our thoughts and prayers to the parents of Kayce Steger, Jessica James, Nicole Hadley, and the wounded children and the entire community of West Paducah.

Today I have the pleasure of appointing Togo West to be Acting Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. When Congress reconvenes, I will nominate him to become Secretary. I know he will bring the same excellence and leadership to the Department we saw under the stewardship of Secretary Jesse Brown and Acting Secretary Hershel Gober. These men are truly dedicated to our Nation's veterans. They help us every day to do right by the men and women who have served the United States.

Togo West's entire life has been dedicated to excellence and commitment. From his experience as an Army officer, to his work in the Ford and Carter administrations, to his outstanding work as Secretary of the Army, he has always understood the special respon-

sibility we owe to our men and women in uniform both during and after their years of service.

Three years ago, Secretary West told the graduating class at West Point, "You teach the life you live." As long as I have known him he has lived this idea, teaching all around him by his example of his devotion to family, church, and country.

I'm grateful for his exceptional service as Secretary of the Army. So are the men and women in the Army. His leadership helped make the Army part of the greatest, best prepared, most modern fighting force in the world. And he's made sure we take good care of our Army families. They, too, serve with our soldiers.

Having supported our men and women in uniform, Togo West will now turn to the equally important task of taking care of the veterans whose deeds ensured the survival of America's ideals. I'm confident he'll bring a strong voice to the Cabinet on these and other matters and that he will ably champion the enduring interests of our veterans.

Would you like to say a word?

[*At this point, Acting Secretary West thanked the President and made brief remarks.*]

The President. Thank you, Togo.

Attorney General Reno's Decision

Q. Mr. President, have you already been informed of Janet Reno's decision on whether to recommend that an independent counsel be named?

The President. No.

Q. Well, could you tell us how you feel in these hours before you're officially informed over this apparent rift between two of your appointees, Janet Reno and the FBI Director, Louis Freeh, who seem to be disagreeing strongly on whether or not there should be an independent counsel?

The President. I don't have any particular feelings about it. All I know about it is what I've seen in the press. I think what I would like to emphasize to you is what I have said all along here: This is a decision of law vested in the Attorney General, which should be made based on the law. I don't believe people outside the Department should attempt to influence the decision, and I have not. And

I think that the Attorney General just has to make the decision, consulting with anyone, including the FBI Director, whom she chooses, and then making the decision she believes is right.

That's what a lot of these jobs involve. I've made a lot of decisions that not everybody who works for me agrees with. That's part of life. And I think we should let her make the decision and then, whatever the decision is, we should get on with the business of America, and the Justice Department should get on with the business of protecting the people of America.

Medicare Commission

Q. Mr. President, how do you view this "no new tax" pledge that Speaker Gingrich is demanding of those that he has chosen for the Medicare commission?

The President. Well, I don't know exactly what to make of it and exactly what it covers. In terms of taxes, per se, I personally don't know that we need any taxes to reform the Medicare system. I hate to see the commissioners themselves have their hands tied at the outset, because I think we want them to be free to look at this Medicare system over the long run.

After all, we now have—in the balanced budget agreement and with the savings incurred back in '93, we now have put more than a decade of life on the Medicare system. The Trust Fund is secure now for a decade, and perhaps more, depending on how well the reforms that we enacted this year work. And so what we want this commission to do is take a look at what the impact of the retirement of the baby boomers will be, what the impact of increasing lifespans will be, and the new technologies and all the opportunities also to save money with preventive strategies under Medicare and take a long look at it.

I had not assumed that they would actually recommend any tax increases in Medicare, which, to me, is different from the cost that consumers have when they buy into the program. But I don't want to tie their hands unduly. I want them to look at it and be free to look at it, and I hope that that's what they'll do.

I think we're going to have an interesting commission of a large number of Members

of Congress, because both the Republicans and the Democrats appointed significant numbers of Members of Congress but also some from outside as well. And we've all pretty well had our members, I think, for some time. We've been trying—I haven't named mine yet, by and large, because we were trying to reach agreement on exactly how the chairmanship would be handled. We haven't quite got that done yet, but I expect it to be done within the next day or two.

Attorney General Reno's Decision

Q. Mr. President, when you said you didn't think that any outsiders should impact on Attorney General Reno's decision, whom were you referring to? Were you referring to Freeh or to Members of Congress or—

The President. No, no. No, he's an insider. I mean, he—and of course, there is the Justice Department division; there's a whole division of professionals who deal with these kinds of cases all the time. And I'm sure that—at least I assume that they've made recommendations to her as well. They should all make their recommendations, and then she has to decide.

But I believe it should be a decision based strictly on the law and not outside political pressure. And I have scrupulously avoided saying anything one way or the other, publicly or privately, that would be that kind of thing. I just don't think the rest of us should be involved in this. This is a legal question.

Q. Are you still uncertain on whether you made any calls from the White House—fundraising?

The President. I've met with the Justice Department, as you know; I've answered them all. I don't have anything to add to what I've already said on that.

Press Secretary Mike McCurry. Thank you, Mr. President.

Q. Mr. President, can I just elaborate—despite Mike McCurry's suggestion that I—[laughter]—on this relationship that you have with Louis Freeh and with Janet Reno. You've in the past suggested that the strains resulting from all these investigations has hampered your ability as President to deal with the other chief law enforcement authorities in the country. Has this become a

real problem, and how will it play out irrespective of Janet Reno's decision?

The President. Well, after the decision is over, when she makes a decision, whatever the decision is, I would expect that things will return to normal because we'll go back to work. I just want everybody to go back to work here. We've got serious law enforcement challenges both beyond our borders and within our country. And the most important thing is that everybody does the people's work up there, that we get back to the business of protecting the American people and dealing with those challenges.

And I think that that's what we're expected to do, that's what we got hired to do, and we shouldn't let anything interfere with that. And I don't intend to let anything interfere with my efforts there. But I thought it was appropriate to limit any personal contacts I had during this period of time because I didn't even want the appearance to be out there that there would be any attempt to influence a decision. I don't think that's right. This is a legal decision; it ought to be made on the facts.

And a lot of the political rhetoric that's been in the press in the last several months I think is entirely inappropriate because there is a legal—there's a statute here, and we cannot get in the position in this country of basically bringing politics to bear on every legal decision that has to be made. That's not the right way to do this.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:50 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Kayce Steger, Jessica James, and Nicole Hadley, high school students killed when a classmate opened fire following a prayer meeting in West Paducah, KY.

Statement on Signing the Amtrak Reform and Accountability Act of 1997

December 2, 1997

Today I am pleased to sign into law S. 738, the "Amtrak Reform and Accountability Act of 1997." This Act represents the first Amtrak reauthorization since 1992 and the most comprehensive restructuring of Amtrak since

the early 1980s. Amtrak is a significant component of our national transportation services in densely populated corridors, such as the northeast; on medium- and short-haul routes; and on transcontinental routes linking cities across the Nation. In many areas of rural America it is the only alternative to the automobile. With the enactment of this legislation, we have the opportunity to set Amtrak on a course to continue these services into the 21st Century.

Amtrak has entered a critical stage in its existence. Over the past several years, Amtrak has restructured its operations and streamlined its approach to inter-city rail passenger service. It has improved its organization and created separate strategic business units that are better able to respond to customer needs. It has also significantly reduced its need for Federal operating subsidies. Today, Amtrak recovers a higher percentage of its operating costs from fares—85.1 percent—than any other passenger or commuter railroad in America, and higher than the rail systems in France and Germany. This Act will allow Amtrak to build upon this progress.

With this Act, Amtrak will now be able to access the \$2.3 billion capital account created in the Taxpayer Relief Act of 1997. With these funds, Amtrak will be able to make many needed capital improvements, including replacing its aging car fleet, upgrading its tracks, and rehabilitating stations and maintenance facilities nationwide. With these improvements in place, Amtrak will be able to attract new customers and better serve existing customers. The implementation of new high-speed operations in the northeast corridor between Boston and Washington is a key part of this greatly improved service.

This Act will also free Amtrak to operate in a more businesslike manner by repealing a number of outdated requirements that hampered its ability to operate more like a private entrepreneurial corporation. In particular, S. 738 frees Amtrak to adjust its route structure to meet demand and to respond to competition rather than to congressional directive.

The Act also addresses certain labor relations issues by directing that these issues be negotiated by Amtrak and its unions through